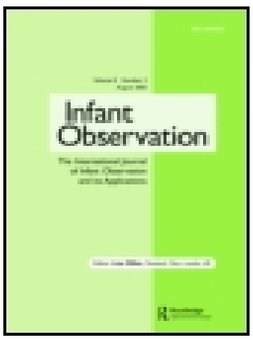

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ABSTRACT

Hansel and Gretel is a familiar and iconic tale of siblings struggling in the face of poverty, abandonment and fear, but it is also a tale of the children's ingenuity and capacity to work together. Freud, Klein and more recent child development research have all added to our understanding of the significance of sibling relationships. In this paper the author briefly notes what is known about the original tale recorded by the brothers Grimm and describes and reflects on the story on a 'scene by scene' basis. In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bettelheim emphasises Hansel and Gretel's ego development and resilience. In the author's reading of the story, consideration is given to the children's inner worlds as described by Klein and the complex nature of interactions between parents and children. These interactions can be seen on a continuum – from familiar, ordinary experiences to those which have relevance to our understanding of children in adverse circumstances. In addition, the story poses different options for growing up – either the wish to bypass or the capacity to embrace the slow and often painful process of development. The tale of *Hansel and Gretel* has been told and re-told in many versions and through different mediums but continues to provide an opportunity to explore both phantasy and reality through the lens of our imagination.

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Hansel and Gretel is a familiar and iconic tale of siblings struggling in the face of poverty, parental rejection, abduction and fear. The fairy tale captures many aspects of sibling relationships – as comrades and potential helpers in the face of adversity, as well as their need for separation and individuation, highlighting the developmental dimension of sibling relationships. Although their ingenuity and capacity to work together saves the day, the story also highlights both ordinary and more disturbing aspects of parent – child interactions.

Bettelheim (1976) draws on a primarily Freudian perspective – based on the theoretical context of instincts, drives and primitive anxieties – to analyse the meaning and importance of fairy tales. In *Hansel and Gretel,* he emphasises the developmental trajectory of the story – from reliance on id to the development of ego, from infantile dependence to a growing reliance on one's own

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capabilities. While there are many aspects of Bettelheim's account that are compelling, stress is placed almost entirely on the *children's* struggle and ego development. In my view, he does not capture a deeper understanding of the complex nature of the 'inner world' as described by Klein (1940), nor the tension *between* the parents and the children (and *between* the parents), implicit in the story.

Fairy tales can be read in different ways – from an historical perspective, in the realm of unconscious phantasies and the internal world, and in terms of the real lives of children and parents. In this paper, I want to explore what is known about the original fairy tale recorded by the Grimm brothers before describing and reflecting on the story on a 'scene by scene' basis. Further thought will be given to how both Freud and Klein, from a psychoanalytic perspective, and more recent developmental research, have added to our understanding of sibling relations. On reading and re-reading the story, I have been struck by how many thoughts it has generated on a continuum, from thinking about early primitive anxieties to considering the real-life issues of children in adverse circumstances. The story also illustrates two contrasting aspects of parent–child interactions – the difficulties children have in establishing and sustaining good internal objects and the difficulties adults have in apprehending children's suffering.

The Grimm brothers' Fairy Tale

The Grimm brothers recorded and first published *Hansel and Gretel* in 1812. However, they also made changes to the story in subsequent publications, most significantly in the fourth edition (1840) when the children's mother was, for the first time, referred to as their stepmother. A later embellishment was the final scene in which the children cross a body of water on the back of a duck. Although most of us feel we 'know' the story, I was struck on reading the Grimm brothers' 1840 version by how much detail I had forgotten. I will therefore give a summary of this version of the story under 'Main scenes' and include reflections on each of these.

Although the Grimm brothers had collected primarily oral tales in German, it was not until the publication of Iona and Peter Opie's book, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (1974), that a fuller account of the origins of *Hansel and Gretel* and its historic context were known. This remarkable couple were researchers and specialists who published an impressive volume of work in relation to all aspects of children's rhymes, games, stories and literature. In relation to *Hansel and Gretel,* they found older published stories that shared similar elements to the Grimm's tale – the first half of Charles Perrault's 'Le petite Poucet' (1697; cited in Opie & Opie, 1974) and Madame d'Aulnoy's 'Finette Cendron' (1721 cited in Opie & Opie, 1974) both include abandoned children who find their way home by following a trail. A house made of confectionery was also discovered in a 14th c. manuscript 'The Land of Cockayne'. In a Swedish tale, they note a

ruse involving a twig which resembles Hansel's trick of using a dry bone to simulate his finger, and in Madame d'Aulnoy's 'Finette Cendron' (1721; cited in Opie & Opie, 1974) the heroine incinerates a giant by shoving him into an oven, similar to Gretel's dispatch of the witch.

A more recent scholar of children's literature and folklore, Tatar (2002) identified a Russian folk tale, 'Vasilisa the Beautiful', in which an evil stepmother, the wife of a woodcutter, tells her stepdaughter to go into the forest to borrow a light from her sister, who turns out to be Baba Yaga, a cannibalistic witch. Tatar notes similar themes to those in *Hansel and Gretel* highlighted in this story – food and hunger, hurting or abandoning children, luring them into danger or eating them. One historic context that might provide a backdrop for such stories was the repeated impact of famine, most particularly the Great Famine of 1315–1317, during which literally millions of people died in Europe. But subsequently, there is a long list of famines spanning the next five centuries, well into the end of the 19th c. It is not surprising that these various events, leading people to abandon children or even resort to cannibalism, must have woven their way into myths and fairy tales in powerful and disturbing ways (Raedisch, 2013, p. 180).

Main 'Scenes'

Starvation and abandonment

At the start of the story, we are told that Hansel and Gretel live in a small house on the edge of the woods with their father, a woodcutter, and his wife, their stepmother. The family are already poor when 'a great famine comes over the land.' The stepmother says, 'What's to become of us? How are we to feed our poor children when we have nothing for ourselves?' She proposes taking the children to the thickest part of the woods and leaving them there. But the father protests, 'I will not do that. How could I bring myself to abandon my own children alone in the woods?' However, the stepmother gives him no peace until he agrees. At daybreak, the parents take the children deep into the woods, set a small fire and tell the children to lie down and rest while they go into the forest to cut wood. They say, 'When we are finished, we will come back and get you.'

In Bettelheim's reading of the story, 'starvation' is seen as the 'symbolic expression [of] … inner experiences directly linked to the mother' (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 160) as the source of all food and nourishment. From a Kleinian point of view, we might imagine how projected feelings of fear, anger, envy or hatred can change the loved and loving mother in the mind of the infant to a frightening/'wicked mother' – not unfamiliar to anyone undertaking infant observation.

From a 'real-life' perspective, I see a family in a perilous situation, struggling for survival and faced with terrible choices and little hope. In modern Western societies, famine may not be a likely threat, but many children still face

hunger as a result of poverty or neglect, often related to parental alcohol or drug abuse or mental illness. Some of these children will end up in care, either removed for their own safety or rejected by their parents. Fear about starvation and abandonment may be read symbolically in relation to the story, but for others these fears may be all too real.

There is however another dimension to this opening scene, not referred to by Bettelheim – the conflict between the parents and their duplicity towards the children. On the one hand, the position of the stepmother highlights the fact that she is likely to have a different relationship with and commitment to the children from their father (characterising her as an archetypal 'evil stepmother'). But her presence also indicates that there must be a lost birth mother in the background (not referred to in the story). [1] On the other hand, to save themselves, the parents make a terrible pact – appearing to care for the children and promising to return, while actually abandoning them to their fate – as father fears 'wild animals might come and tear them to pieces'. This duplicity in deceiving the children is particularly poignant as it becomes clear that the children overhear their parents' conversation.

The children's response

Aware of the potential danger they are in, on the first occasion, Hansel collects white pebbles which he drops along the path so they can find their way home. As they leave with their parents, he looks back to see a white dove sitting on the chimney of their cottage. Settled by a fire and told to wait for their parents to return, the children fall asleep. When they finally wake up, it is already dark and Gretel cries, 'How will we get out of the woods?' Hansel reassures her that if they wait for the moon to rise, they can follow the white pebbles home. On their return, the father is overjoyed, but over time the stepmother renews her efforts to get rid of the children – 'We will take them deeper into the woods, so they will not find their way out. Otherwise, there will be no help for us.'

Once again, the children overhear the conversation. Hansel tries to collect white pebbles as he had done before, but the door of the cottage is locked. The next morning, the stepmother gives them pieces of bread to take with them. On the way into the woods, Hansel throws breadcrumbs onto the ground to mark their path. Once again, a fire is built and the children are told to sit and wait while the parents work in the woods – 'We will come and get you in the evening when we are finished.'

When the moon comes up, the children try to find their way home, but birds had eaten the breadcrumbs, leaving them with no trail to follow. Hungry and tired, they fall asleep under a tree and the third day, walk deeper and deeper into the woods.

Although there is a tendency for parents to deny that children are aware of parental conflict or family circumstances, this is rarely the case. Children

overhear, sense moods and tensions or apprehend their own version of what is troubling their parents. Often, they feel they are the cause of such difficulties, given the immediacy of young children's feelings of fear and guilt and their omnipotence of thought. But here Hansel and Gretel's knowledge of the parents' plan mobilises them to save themselves.

Initially Hansel uses his intelligence and ingenuity to save them both by leaving the trail of white pebbles. But on the second occasion, with only bread-crumbs to mark their way, they are lost.

Alone in the woods

Alone, Hansel and Gretel 'walked through the entire night and the next day from morning until evening, but they did not find their way out of the woods.' Throughout mythology and folklore, woods represent a place of potential danger, as well as on occasion, a place in which mysterious or other-worldly things can happen. (Porteous, 2002).

Here the tale of *Hansel and Gretel* is reminiscent of a more contemporary children's story, *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963). Max the protagonist, also responds to hunger, having been sent to his room without supper. In his anger and torment, he conjures up woods in his imagination, after traversing 'an ocean, … he sailed off through night and day and in and out of weeks and almost over a year to where the wild things are'. This element of time in *Hansel and Gretel*, as in *Where the Wild Things Are*, indicates that they (and we as readers) are being transported into another world – perhaps an inner world of imagination, phantasy and dreams where things happen – out with linear time.

The Gingerbread house [2]

Lost deep in the woods and hungry, the children see a 'little snow-white bird sitting on a branch.' Following the flight of the bird, they come across a house 'built entirely from bread with a roof made of cake, and the windows made of clear sugar'. Propelled by their hunger, they begin nibbling on the house. When they encounter an old woman, she takes them in hand and serves them 'milk and pancakes with sugar, apples, and nuts' and does everything to make them feel comfortable and safe. But soon they apprehend the old woman's true intent – she is a witch who captures and devours children, 'Now, I have them!'

Hansel is locked in a cage, while Gretel is put to work. Aware of the witch's plan, Hansel tricks her by offering her a small bone instead of his finger for her to check whether he is fattening up. We are told that four weeks pass before the witch can wait no longer and prepares to cook Hansel. In the process, she asks Gretel to fetch water, 'I am going to slaughter [Hansel] and

boil him'. The next morning the witch sets a fire in the oven and asks Gretel to climb inside to see if it is hot enough, intending to close the oven door and bake Gretel and eat her as well. But when Gretel protests that she doesn't know how to test the oven, the witch demonstrates by climbing inside herself, only for Gretel to shove the witch into the oven and close the iron door. Gretel releases Hansel from his cage as both cry out, 'The old witch is dead!'

On finding the gingerbread house the children begin eating it – literally 'eating someone out of house and home' much as the stepmother had feared. In Bettelheim's analysis of the story, the children seem overcome by greed and oral aggression, driven by their hunger. But Klein provides another way of conceptualising what happens. Initially, the children encounter the old woman as an 'idealised mother', providing for the children's every need, much as Klein (1946, 1980 p.7) describes as the instinctual desire for the ideal, inexhaustible and always bountiful breast. Very quickly the old woman becomes a 'persecuting/ terrifying mother' – a witch – endowed in part by the children's own aggressive impulses and fears of retaliation. That is, through projection, the very person who in phantasy is attacked becomes in phantasy, an attacker. These two extremes, characteristic of the earliest stages of mental development, are the result of extreme splitting the good (gratifying) and bad (frustrating) breast, along with feelings of love and hate and the dispersal of destructive impulses (Klein, 1946, 1980 p. 2). Throughout her writings Klein points to the very complex emotions and inner conflicts that young children face – in relation to their earliest objects– placing mental life firmly in the context of object relations. In the story, the children dispatch the witch by tricking her (Hansel) and turning the tables on her (Gretel) – literally shoving her in the oven, reminiscent of witches being burned at the stake.

The return and 'Happy Ending'

In searching the house before they leave, the children find chests full of pearls and precious stones which they stuff into their pockets. To get out of the 'witch's woods' they walk several hours before arriving at a large body of water with no bridge or boats to allow them to cross. A white duck offers to help them, but the children are too heavy to take together, rather they must cross one at a time.

On the other side, the woods grow more and more familiar until finally, they see their father's house in the distance. 'They began to run, rushed inside, and threw their arms around the father's neck'. The father had 'never had a happy hour since he left the children in the woods' and in that time, his wife had died. The children scatter their pearls and precious stones at their father's feet – 'Now all their cares were at an end, and they lived happily together'.

On the witch's death, the children procure pearls and precious stones – all the witch's wealth. Here Bettelheim (1976, 1991 p. 164) portrays the children's

acquisition of the 'treasure' almost entirely in terms of their ego development – 'the children's new-won independence in thought and action, a new self-reliance which is the opposite of the passive dependence which characterised them when they were deserted in the woods'. However, from an object-relations perspective, something more complex begins to unfold in the reading of this story.

The children's wish to take possession of the riches seems provoked by feelings of deprivation and envy towards the witch/ mother. Their grievance and desire are perhaps indicative of how the riches are acquired (by killing the witch/ mother and stealing the pearls and precious stones). Omnipotence and destructive impulses take hold with the children triumphing over the mother/ witch in a manic way. Similarly, although delighted to be reunited with the children, the father is now widowed and on his own with no parental/ sexual partner – surely this smacks of Oedipal triumph!

Here the story seems to present two options for growing up – one in which both parents are 'dispatched', leaving the children with all the 'treasure' – magically and omnipotently stepping into their parents' shoes, thus avoiding a slower and more difficult process of real development. But there is another version, I think, proposed by the children's journey home. Interestingly, in finding their way home time and distance is traversed, as well as a body of water, not unlike the 'ocean' that Max re-crosses in *Where the Wild Things Are*. The fact that the children can only cross the river separately indicates an important aspect of sibling relationships – the need to separate and individuate in the process of growing up, as well as signifying that a 'transition' (a process such as adolescence) is needed. However, in the story they cannot do this alone, but are helped by the third white bird – a duck who assists them on their journey. Could the white birds throughout the story represent an internalised good object, perhaps symbolic of the absent/ dead birth mother, now present and helpful in their internal worlds?

One further thought about the children's new-found 'treasures' – might they be symbolic also of their developing sexuality? As siblings their relationship should be one of cooperation and affection, not of sex and passion. But their ongoing journey – into adolescence and adulthood – opens the door to the potential of finding partners and having children of their own (the real treasures).

Freud and Klein on brothers and sisters

Interestingly, Bettelheim mentions nothing of Freud's contribution to understanding sibling relationships, perhaps mirroring a general misconception that Freud neglected the importance of sibling relationships. On re-reading Freud, Sherwin-White (2014a, p. 12) found:

> an enormous wealth and richness of discussion of various aspects of the psychology of siblings and its importance for psychic development, from childhood to puberty and into adulthood.

In his case studies – particularly in 'Little Hans', the Rat Man' and the 'Wolf Man' – Freud wrote extensively about the complicated and powerful emotions that accompanied sibling relationships – issues such as the impact of the birth of a new baby, the significance of birth order, favouritism, sibling jealousy, rivalry, sibling incest, etc. Quite apart from underestimating siblings, in the 'development of his concept of the 'family complex', brothers and sisters are recognised along with … parents 'as 'primary objects' in the oedipal scenario, internalised for life and influential in an individual's socialisation and choice of later partners' (p. 7).

Sherwin-White (2014b) also re-assessed Klein's contribution to our understanding of sibling relations. Of the numerous case studies in which siblings are mentioned, the most detailed and extensive is given in Klein's (1961) *Narrative of a Child Analysis*. Here Klein describes 10-year-old Richard's complex and conflictual feeling towards his older brother and his resultant hatred and fear of other children, also encountered in therapy in relation to Klein's other patients. Klein's thoughtful tracking of his intense rivalry with his brother and father for his mother's affections gradually gives way to more ambivalent feelings of love and hate which led to better relations with his parents, brother and other children. In this and other cases, Klein also highlights the dilemma for particularly youngest and only children – their fear of being displaced by a new baby, as well as feelings of anxiety and guilt that phantasised attacks on the parental couple might have interfered with this process. Klein (1955, 1980 p. 169) notes 'the wish to make reparation by bringing to life the unborn brothers and sisters', underpins a longing for siblings as allies and friends.

Lessons from developmental research

From a psychoanalytic perspective, both Freud and Klein seem to anticipate and confirm the systematic research into the nature, interactions and quality of sibling relationships undertaken most notably by Judy Dunn and colleagues from the 1980s. She highlighted the significance of sibling relationships, not only as one of the potentially longest relationships in our lives, but also in terms of the ways in which they shape our development (Dunn, 1988). The range and depth of this research, which spans more than 30 years, is far too extensive to summarise, even briefly, but there are aspects of this work that, in my view, have particular relevance to *Hansel and Gretel*.

In a longitudinal study, Brown and Dunn (1996) found that although children at 2 years old primarily interact with their mothers, by 47 months they spent twice as much time talking with their siblings than with their mothers. That is, for children with siblings nearer their own age, the interaction, shared activities and pretend play, all contribute to their developing social interactions, most importantly to their understanding of others minds and emotions. Throughout *Hansel and Gretel*, we see the children's sensitivity to each other, as well as their capacity to work things out together.

Another feature of sibling relationships highlighted by Dunn (1988) is the way in which these relationships naturally change during the course of development – from middle childhood into adolescence – as friendship groups and interests outside the home begin to take hold. In the story, we see this played out with the children crossing the body of water separately, symbolising their inevitable move towards independence, but also implying an increased awareness of their gender differences and developing sexuality.

Finally, Boer and Dunn (1992) researched the impact of adverse family circumstances on sibling relations; which include parental conflict and differential treatment of siblings. Their findings were that these could lead to hostile, conflicted sibling relations, mirroring the conflicts within the family. But there was also evidence that siblings could develop supportive relationships in response to adverse circumstances or where parents were unavailable, such as those portrayed in *Hansel and Gretel*.

Discussion

Since its first publication, *Hansel and Gretel* has been told and retold, presented in various mediums and beautifully illustrated by Arthur Rackham in a volume of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (Rackham, 1909). More recently, the story has been animated, and been the subject of a number of action films, including a 2020 film directed by Oz Perkins entitled *Gretel and Hansel* in which Gretel takes centre stage as the heroine (opening the door to a feminist analysis of the fairy tale).

One version of the story is Humperdinck's opera *Hansel and Gretel*. First performed in Weimar on 23rd December 1893 and conducted by Richard Strauss. It became an almost overnight success and remains a popular part of contemporary opera repertoire.[3] In the opera, the stepmother and the witch are generally performed by the same person, giving concrete embodiment of her murderous intent towards the children. But one aspect of the opera at variance with the original tale is the overly romantic ending in which all the children captured by the witch, on her death, are freed from their spell and come back to life. All negative aspects of the children are split off as they are portrayed almost as angels. The music that accompanies this 'miracle' is the familiar and beautiful 'Children's Prayer'.[4] The popular story, the beautiful music, and the 'happy ending' coalesce to make this a 'classic'.

The fact that *Hansel and Gretel* has been re-imagined in so many ways and still captures our imagination today prompts us to think about 'universal meanings', but Opie and Opie (1974, pp. 17–18) warn against this type of analysis of fairy tales. They assert that their origins and meanings are too numerous – spanning countries and often centuries. Neither should we consider it as a 'moral tale' which is the province of fables.[5] Yet, in Bettelheim's analysis of the story, the emphasis is placed almost entirely on the children's struggle and developments,

overlooking the tension *between* the parents and *between* the parents and the children.

In the original Grimm story, the mother and father were 'in it together' – co-conspirators in 'ditching' the children. Here they seem to be acting out some of the feelings identified by Winnicott (1994) in 'Hate in the counter-transference' in which he lists 18 reasons why a mother might hate her baby for all the restrictions and demands he imposes on her. Nevertheless, the parents' attempt to rid themselves of the children, in many ways, is an all too ordinary and familiar experience. Portrayed in a more contemporary way, parents need 'time out' and time together – a 'night out', a 'weekend away'. Surely most children will have overheard their parents planning such events. (It must be added that children too need time away from their parents – to play, develop new skills, make friends and acquire their own sense of agency).

However, there is a further complicating factor, also familiar to most children. Both the parents and the witch are duplicitous; they say one thing and do another, surely another reason for the children to keep their wits about them! In the story, the parents promise to return to fetch the children in the woods – but they do not. The witch is more seductive in her persuasiveness. Both children are lied to by the very people who should protect them. Yet, with the best will in the world, surely at some point this is every child's subjective experience – perhaps most poignantly at night when children are separated from their parents.

In ordinary families with good enough parents, children have many opportunities to recover good relations, externally and internally, even when they have experienced separation (perhaps felt as abandonment) or lies (perhaps felt as a betrayal). But I came to see the story as representing a continuum of experience – from the very ordinary to considering the plight of children in adverse circumstances – those who may have experienced real neglect or abuse or have been on the receiving end of active rejection. Those working in the field of child protection are all too familiar with the difficulties of determining the nature of neglect – 'when enough is enough' – and collating the devasting impact these experiences can have on a child's development, as well as how this might be encountered within clinical work (Music, 2009). These are children left to their own devices, perhaps hungry or frightened, who over time, may not even be able to recognise their own need or mobilise anger. Similarly, Youell (2002, p. 121) highlights the ways in which workers might misinterpret a child's compliance or withdrawal as evidence of resilience when this may be an indication of serious problems, detrimental to their future development.

There is yet another troubling aspect to the story, the fact that the children return home not once, but twice, in spite of being aware of their parents' plans. Those working in the field of fostering and adoption often find it hard to comprehend the strong impulse of children who wish to return to birth parents, regardless of how abusive their relationships may have been.

Attachment research indicates the dilemma that rejection by a main carer places a child in – simultaneously activating contradictory impulses. 'The situation is self-perpetuating because rebuff heightens alarm and hence heightens attachment leading to increase rebuff, increased alarm and increased heightening of attachment' (Main & Weston, 1982). In addition to this, '… poorly attached and badly treated children believe very strongly that this is their own fault, blaming themselves for their parents' failure to love them' (Hunter, 2001, p. 118). That is, an awareness of the more negative aspects of their parents becomes split off, thus preserving the idea of a loved parent and one who loves them.

In a previously unpublished lecture by Klein, given at the London Institute of Education in 1939, she clearly and simply writes about the real dilemmas in relation to parents and children (Klein, 1939). On the one hand there is the tendency for adults to minimise the suffering of children, on the other hand there is a wish for children to please and adapt themselves to adult wishes and standards. As she says in her own words:

> Our own wish that our children should be happy, which leads us to minimize the signs of their unhappiness, thus coincides with [children's] unconscious and conscious desire to gratify and please us. (p. 40–41)

Given this state of affairs, it is all too easy to see how children's adaptation, even to unsatisfactory situations, may be seen as 'resilience' or how children might turn to their siblings as 'allies'. In *Hansel and Gretel*, overcoming the witch and finding their way home is generally lauded; their capacities to outsmart her and work together overshadows the trauma they experienced, lost and terrified for their lives.

This brings us to the problem of the 'Happy Ending'. What are we to make of the children returning to their loving father, who was complicit in trying to get rid of them? How do we square the children's triumphant dispatching of the witch with the death of their stepmother? As in most fairy tales, the happy ending rather circumvents uncomfortable aspects of the story and in this case forecloses a deeper exploration of what happened between the parents and children, for instance, the father's lack of acknowledgement of his responsibility in leaving the children in the forest, or the children's death wishes towards the stepmother/ witch, which essentially splits the parental couple and sidesteps any Oedipal resolution. Both turn a blind eye to these 'wishes.' From the children's point of view, the ending might read as follows: 'We are smart and clever, more so than the adults; we have each other – who needs parents? We have all the riches (pearls and precious stones) and can fend for ourselves!' More than aspirational in terms of relying on their developing resources, we could see the story as a wish to bypass the hard work of growing up and relying on parents in favour of a much more 'adolescent' solution – not needing parents at all!

There is a further complication evident from the adults' point of view; the tendency to deny children's pain and suffering. Bettelheim's analysis of the story rather falls into this trap by emphasising the children's resilience, their achievement at overcoming, oral need, hunger and greed, embracing new-found competencies and feelings of self-reliance. In my view, this does not do justice to the complexity the story conveys, nor what we as child psychotherapists or other professionals might face – trying to understand children's conflicted inner worlds and the implications for their lived experiences. Added to this are the defences that can invade professional networks, making it hard to apprehend children's pain. In considering the difficulty of the professionals involved in the Victoria Climbié case, Rustin notes, 'the desire of professionals to keep a distance from the intense feelings stirred up by exposure to human cruelty and madness.' (Rustin, 2004, p. 72).

The story is indeed a complex tale of parent–child interactions, but it is also a tale of how this is all played out in the children's internal worlds, where primitive anxieties and destructive impulses are likely to overwhelm more dependent and loving aspects of the self. Perhaps this is particularly evident at night when children are separated from their parents and phantasies and dreams take hold. In this imaginary world, it is all too easy to see how parents can change in the mind, from a caring parental couple to an excluding sexual couple, from a loving mother or father to bad/ wicked or frightening figures – the stuff of nightmares. The theme of losing and regaining good internal objects weaves its way throughout the story symbolically - from dropping the white pebbles en route to the woods, to the break with good objects at the Gingerbread House. This helps us also to understand children's very real struggles in restoring and sustaining their loving feelings in the face of ordinary, repeated frustrations and deprivations. In *Where the Wild Things Are*, after the 'wild rumpus' and his journey home, Max first smells and then apprehends that his supper is still hot. In spite of his anger and upset, good internal objects, along with loving feelings between him and his mother are recovered. It is interesting that neither in *Where the Wild Things Are* nor in *Hansel and Gretel* are the children reunited with a parental couple, circumventing potential Oedipal issues. Rather, in *Hansel and Gretel*, it is the importance of loving and supportive sibling relations that is highlighted. Klein's emphasis on the positive aspects of sibling relationships, less closely aligned with Oedipal conflicts aroused by parental figures, might be of relevance here. (Rustin & Rustin, 2017, p. 100). Reflecting on my own responses to the story, I can still conjure up visceral feelings of terror at the thought of being 'eaten up'. Perhaps, even as a story, *Hansel and Gretel* could not be borne without sharing the experience with a sibling?

One aspect of the story remained in my mind as a conundrum. Why does the second white bird, a dove, lead the children to the Gingerbread House and towards potential danger? Only gradually could I see that, as in most fairy tales, there is no growth or development without risk - children need to face

fears and anxieties in order to master them. They also need to establish good and sustaining internal objects to help them navigate the world on their own.

A final puzzle is a 'coda' at the very end of the fairy tale:

Now all their cares were at an end, and they live happily together
My tale is done,
A mouse has run.
And whoever catches it can make for himself from it a large, large fur cap.

At first these lines seem a nonsense. On reflection it appears to be a reminder that what has taken place is indeed a tale, and whosoever reads it can take from it what one will. But if you 'catch it' – from something small (a mouse) – you can make something large (and presumably useful or meaningful). As Jensen (2017) notes: 'The story is brief, the ending merely a few throwaway lines of poetry, and yet from this tiny story comes a multiplicity of meanings, encoded wisdom, and 'deep image' to keep our metaphorical heads warm'.

Often, while working on this paper, I woke up early in the morning, full of ideas – further thoughts and possible interpretations – as if during the night the fairy tale had worked its magic in my mind – surely the sign of a good story. In an ordinary way, the fairy tale captures a dilemma in the complex relationships between parents and children, but it is the prerogative of fairy tales to do just that. Stories such as this are often read to children at bedtimes in the context of loving relationships. Generally, these stories end with fears overcome and the children triumphant. But it is my view that the story also acts as a 'container' (Bion, 1962) for these complicated, unconscious and perhaps more aggressive aspects of parent – child interactions, as well as the more obvious primitive anxieties in relation to abandonment, hunger and fear of death.[6]

Fairy tales provide an opportunity to explore these issues through the lens of our imagination. As Opie and Opie (1974, p. 16) so aptly describe 'Fairy tales are thus more realistic than they may appear at first sight, while the magic in them almost heightens the realism. The magic sets us wondering how we ourselves would react in similar circumstances. It encourages speculation. It gives a child license to wonder. And this is the merit of tales, that by going beyond the possibility they enlarge our daily horizon.'

Notes

1. There remains a question as to why 'mother' was changed to 'stepmother' in the Grimm's 4th Edition. Might this 'softening' of the story have been a way to make it more palpable, thus protecting an implied 'good birth mother?'
2. Although there is a long history of gingerbread shaping and decoration in Germany and elsewhere, gingerbread houses became popular after the publication of *Hansel and Gretel,* particularly around Christmas.
3. It was the first complete opera to be broadcast on radio from Covent Garden, London in 1923.
4. The lyrical music of the 'Children's Prayer' forms part of the Overture of the opera and variations of the theme are referenced throughout, making it one of the themes that

unifies the opera as a whole. Only later did I think of this quasi-religious take on the story and the three white birds that make their appearance at different points in the story as perhaps symbolizing the familiar Christian symbol of the Descending Dove.

5. Although both fairy tales and fables have their origins in the oral tradition, fairy tales tend to engage children's imagination in undertaking an adventure or overcoming a difficulty in which there is usually a happy resolution, whereas fables convey a moral tale with an uncertain outcome depending on the lesson to be learned.
6. The fact that fairy tales and children's literature in general are vessels for emotional containment of childhood anxieties is well documented by Margaret and Michael Rustin (1987) in *Narratives of Love and Loss: Studies in Modern Children's Literature.*

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